

Determine a Church Ordinance?

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In answer to this question the writer confidently affirms that there are at least five essential characteristics by which to measure a form and determine whether it belongs to that class of forms known as ordinances for the church. There may be other characteristics that should be added to this list of five, but these five constitute a minimum and deserve the careful consideration and acceptance of every child of God. And in order that they may constitute an infallible rule by which to determine the number and names of the ordinances, these five come from the Word of God, they are crystal clear, and are absolutely indispensable. In the order of their importance, and in the order by which the forms are progressively eliminated, each of the five essential characteristics will be treated.

Special Time

The first essential characteristic for a church ordinance is a special time for its institution. This is so important that it must stand first in order. Any time in the ministry of Christ may seem to satisfy the general conditions, but any time will not settle unquestionably the fact that Christ was instituting forms for the church alone. It is therefore necessary to ascertain whether Christ was merely continuing Old Testament forms, or whether He was instituting new forms for His church. By settling the matter of time one may guard against any view which insists that the church of the Old and New Testaments are the same, or that the church now is a body of believers for whom Christ provided no ordinances.

To this end, therefore, it is well to remember that when Christ first stepped out upon the stage of His public ministry, His message was "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). And so far as we are

able to tell this message did not change until very late in His public ministry. When it became quite evident that He was being rejected by His own people, then He shifted to another theme. This new message pointed specifically to the church, an enterprise He had not yet begun, and after rejection by Israel, one which would supplant for an indefinite period the visible establishing of the kingdom. He said, "I will build my church," and later reiterated it (Matt. 16:18; Acts 1:6-8). The first statement falls within the final eight months of His public ministry, the second during the post-resurrection ministry. As one traces the developments in these final months there is borne out all that Christ predicted

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would happen when citing the reason for shifting in purpose from the kingdom to the church (Matt. 16:21).

During those final crisis days, Christ instituted the ordinances for His church. He could not have done so earlier lest they be construed to belong to Old Testament ceremony, and He could not have delayed the matter to a later time lest it be argued that these forms belong to some future dispensation. This was the strategic time. So while it was yet possible to point His disciples toward the inauguration of the church and also provide instruction for them during His absence, He instituted the ordinances. Only those forms falling within this final period of public ministry can thus qualify to be received as ordinances for the church of God. And among those forms falling within that special period of time are baptism, feetwashing, the Lord's

Supper, and the communion of the bread and cup (Matt. 28:19; John 13:1-17; I Cor. 11:17-34).

Sovereign Authorization

The foregoing essential narrows down the number of forms for the church so far by setting the limits of time within which ordinances for the church may be instituted that the specific ordinances for the church can almost be settled without going further. But the second essential characteristic for a church ordinance measures more precisely each form and confirms what has already been settled by the previous essential. This essential settles the fact that only those forms sovereignly authorized by the Lord Jesus Christ himself can qualify as ordinances for the church. Thus the seal of the Son of God is upon these forms. Having received His approval, the rite thus derives the right of perpetuation from Him.

The relationship which Jesus Christ sustains to the church argues convincingly for this point. Since Christ is the Head of the church, which is His body (Col. 1:18), it follows logically that from the day of Pentecost when the church was formed to the day of presentation of the church to himself without spot or wrinkle or any such thing that the church should obey her sovereign Lord. It is therefore fitting that the Lord of the church should not have delegated to any other, not even to an apostle, the sacred task of instituting ordinances for the church. Nor did He delegate this task. Every one of these sacred forms was instituted, initiated, and introduced into the church by Christ himself.

It is of interest to every child of God that Christ also felt this way about the matter. For in the case of each one of the forms instituted for the church, the Spirit of God led the

writers of the Gospels to remember Christ's own recognition of His authority at the time He was instituting the forms for the church. Christ was deeply conscious of the completeness of His authority, or He would not have said: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matt. 28:18) before instituting the ordinance of baptism. Nor would John have made reference to the fact that "Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands" (John 13:3) preceded the inauguration of the threefold communion service. Just as the first essential marks out four ordinances, so this essential confirms the same four.

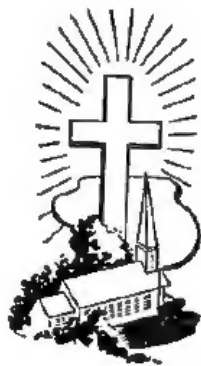
Symbolical Meaning

While many things may fall within a special time and receive sovereign authorization, they could not properly be termed ordinances unless they are forms with symbolical meaning. Ordinances must have symbolical meaning. They must signify spiritual truth, or else they do not fall within that class of forms known as church ordinances. If there is efficacy attached to the doing of them, then they are not ordinances, but works in the strictest sense of the word, and they must be eliminated from consideration in this study. Here again, however, it will be seen that there are four that qualify, and may safely be considered as belonging to the doctrine and practice of the church.

The place and importance of symbols in the life and practice of the church is not to be minimized nor misinterpreted. Little does the average individual realize how much of his life is made up of symbols without which he would not be able to carry on the ordinary intercourse of life. The alphabet is a system of symbols. This is also true of numbers. And words are symbols of ideas. We use them daily without attaching to them any such thing as efficacy. And the same thing is true of the symbols Christ instituted for conveying spiritual truth to the members of His church.

The special value of an ordinance thus lies in its symbolical nature, this value being twofold. In the first place

it refreshes the memory with the truth. That is precisely what Christ meant when He said: "This do in remembrance of me" (I Cor. 11:24-25; Luke 22:19). Since pure and proper conduct is absolutely dependent upon a conscious realization of truth concerning the believer's relation to Christ, how important it is therefore to use every means to convey that truth to the believer. And certainly the ordinances are intended to do that very thing. Closely associated with this, then, is the second value; namely, that the ordinance conserves spiritual truth. Since it is a symbol with specific meaning, it will hold and speak that truth. Therefore Paul said of the bread and cup: "Ye do shew forth the Lord's death till he come" (I Cor. 11:26). Even though believers may lose this truth, the ordinance will preserve it. And this is true of all the ordinances.



Great Spiritual Reality

As we turn to this essential the field of forms is now so well narrowed down that we are only concerned with those forms that do possess symbolical meaning. Not all of these dare be admitted to the class of ordinances, lest the saints be in bondage to forms. So this essential is sure to narrow them down to forms that set forth some great spiritual truth. It will thus be seen more clearly than ever, that four forms are firmly established.

By insisting that an ordinance must set forth some great spirituality, it will be seen that our Lord employed the law of conservation, thus reducing to a minimum the forms for His church. He also employed the law of magnitude, thus providing for every great spiritual reality. And He

did not overlook the law of adequacy; namely, covering in the forms every great spiritual reality of the Christian life. There are therefore neither too few nor too many ordinances. But there are enough.

In the light of this fact the line of demarcation is more sharply drawn about four forms instituted by Christ. The foundation for the Christian life set forth in the work of Christ on Calvary and known to believers as justification is symbolized by the bread and cup. The commencement of the Christian life beginning with union with Christ by faith and regeneration by the Holy Spirit is clearly pictured by the baptism of believers in water. The continuation of the Christian life is also set forth. This is known as sanctification by the Word of God, and is well portrayed in the washing of the saints' feet. For the consummation of the Christian life, the Lord's Supper, or love feast, depicts the final glorification and reunion of all believers in heaven.

Command for Perpetuation

This essential is final and conclusive. While the preceding measuring rods have progressively reduced the field of possible forms for the church, this last one is indisputably necessary to confirm absolutely the number and names of the ordinances. There must be a command for perpetuation either expressed or clearly implied, or the form in question is nothing more than a historical incident with no further value than the truth association with it at the time it occurred.

Without a doubt four forms come within the circle drawn by this measuring line, and there are no more. These four forms will then qualify as ordinances for the church. For three of these there are clearly stated commands for perpetuation—Baptism, Feetwashing, and the Eucharist (Matt. 28:19; John 13:13-15; Luke 22:19-20). For the Lord's Supper there is most certainly every reason to believe that this too was commanded. It was associated with the two forms inaugurated on that last night (John 13:1-3), and the apostles taught believers to practice it (I Cor. 11:17-34).